

Richard 'Smokey' Young

Ahead of the Al Ain Aerobatic Show (January 28-31), Richard 'Smokey' Young reveals to Time Out what it takes to be an aerobatic pilot



What is aerobatics?

My personal definition is that it is the precise, maximum performance manoeuvring of an aircraft about all three axes and all manner of attitudes [the angle of the plane's nose to the horizon].

Sounds tricky. How'd you get into it?

I started my flying career in the US Air Force (USAF). In USAF pilot training, we were taught some basic aerobatics: spins, loops, aileron rolls, barrel rolls, Cuban eights. We were required to do the manoeuvres precisely, but they were not executed the same way that competition aerobatics pilots fly their routines. I then left the military and went into airline flying. It was at this point I began participating in closed course air racing.

So what can we expect?

Some very aggressive dog fighting and vertical manoeuvring. In addition, if the course allows, I may try some angular deliveries to get my aim close to the target.

Your hands and feet just know where to go to move the plane where you want

How can you tell a good stunt pilot?

I don't consider myself a stunt pilot. To me, the term 'stunt' has a connotation of impromptu manoeuvring or dare-devilishness. I am a race pilot and aerobatics pilot. Everything I do is well thought out and tested before taking it to a competition. My aerobatic routine is scripted. I have practised each manoeuvre so many times that I know them by heart. I learn and practice new manoeuvres up high to start. Once I can fly the aeroplane into and out of the manoeuvre with

total and complete predictability, I take it to lower altitudes.

Do you have a favourite manoeuvre, then?

It's called a spiraling tower. It's an airshow manoeuvre, not a competition aerobatic one. I usually begin by coming out of an outside three-quarter loop. I roll upright, accelerate to about 260kph, then pull the plane onto a vertical line (nose pointed straight up) and turn on the smoke. Once on the vertical line I push the stick over to my left thigh, which starts a rapid roll, and push in a little rudder. This makes the plane 'wobble' a bit, making a large spiral of smoke as it climbs. As the plane runs out of speed, I put in full rudder to enter a spin. The plane then spins back down through the column of smoke.

What goes through your mind during a stunt like that?

I stay very focused on where I am spatially: what my altitude is, what my airspeed is, and where the nose of the aeroplane is pointed. I concentrate on doing the manoeuvre correctly; applying the proper control inputs. My concentration is really 100 per cent outside the aeroplane. Your hands and feet just know where to go to move the plane to where you want it to be.

So have you ever crashed?

I have had several emergency landings. Most were in the military. I was doing a maintenance test flight in the F-111 one day. We were at Mach 2.5 (about 2,255kph) and at 50,000ft, then all of a sudden the left engine compressor stalled and caught fire. It was a violent failure and the plane decelerated. It felt like a rock for 30,000ft because it needs to be going fast to fly at such a high altitude. We put the fire out in the descent and got the plane under control. Fuel was leaking rapidly, but we were able to get the plane into a field nearby without further incident. But you rely on your training. You handle the problem and get the aeroplane safely on the ground.

Are you superstitious?

I'm not superstitious, but we all have our rituals. Before I race at Reno, my business partner Nancy Sobczak always makes me a latte. Her husband Rob, another business partner, brings it over to me in the hangar. It wouldn't be good for me to race

without that latte.

Any New Year's resolutions? I didn't make any. Nothing about me should change.

Al Ain Aerobatic Show takes place from January 28-31. Info at www.alainaerobaticshow.com. Tickets from www.timeouttickets.com

